

# BEFORE ADAM



By  
**JACK LONDON**



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## CHAPTER XII.

Went on through the trees toward the caves, an excited and disorderly mob, that drove before it to their holes all the small life of the forest and that set the bluejays screaming impudently. Now that there was no immediate danger, Long Lip waited for his grandfather, Marrow Bone, and with the gap of a generation between them the old fellow and the youth brought up our rear.

And so it was that Lop Ear became a bachelor once more. That night I slept with him in the old cave, and our old life of clumping began again. The loss of his mate seemed to cause him no grief. At least he showed no signs of it nor of need for her. It was the wound in his leg that seemed to bother him, and it was all of a week before he got back again to his old spryness.

Marrow Bone was the only old member in the horde. Sometimes on looking back upon him, when the vision of him is most clear, I note a striking resemblance between him and the father of my father's grandfather. The grandfather's father was very old, very wrinkled and withered, and for all the world when he peered through his tiny bleary eyes and mumbled with his toothless gums he looked and acted like old Marrow Bone. This resemblance, as a child, used to frighten me. I always ran when I saw the old man tottering along on his two canes. Old Marrow Bone even had a bit of sparse and straggly white beard that seemed identical with the whiskers of the old man.

As I have said, Marrow Bone was the only old member of the horde. He was an exception. The folk never lived to old age. Middle age was fairly rare. Death by violence was the common way of death. They died as my father had died, as Broken Tooth had died, as my sister and the Hairless One had just died—abruptly and brutally, in the full possession of their faculties, in the full swing and rush of life. Natural death? To die violently was the natural way of dying in those days.

No one died of old age among the folk. I never knew of a case. Even Marrow Bone did not die that way, and he was the only one in my generation who had the chance. A bad crippling, any serious accidental or temporary impairment of the faculties, meant swift death. As a rule these deaths were not witnessed. Members of the horde simply dropped out of sight. They left the caves in the morning, and they never came back. They disappeared—into the ravenous maws of the hunting creatures.

This inroad of the Fire People on the carrot patch was the beginning of the end, though we did not know it. The hunters of the Fire People began to appear more frequently as the time went by. They came in twos and threes, creeping silently through the forest, with their flying arrows able to annihilate distance and bring down prey from the top of the loftiest tree without themselves climbing into it. The bow and arrow was like an enormous extension of their leaping and striking muscles, so that, virtually, they could leap and kill at a hundred feet and more. This made them far more terrible than Saber Tooth himself.

And then, too, they were very wise. They had speech that enabled them more effectively to reason, and in addition they understood co-operation.

We folk came to be very circumspect when we were in the forest. We were more alert and vigilant and timid. No longer were the trees a protection to be relied upon. No longer could we perch on a branch and laugh down at our carnivorous enemies on the ground. The Fire People were carnivorous, with claws and fangs a hundred feet long, the most terrible of all the hunting animals that ranged the primal world.

One morning, before the folk had dispersed to the forest, there was a rumble among the water carriers and those who had gone down to the river to drink. The whole horde fled to the caves. It was our habit at such times



Red Eye.

to flee first and investigate afterward. We waited in the mouths of our caves and watched. After some time a fire man stepped cautiously into the open space. It was the little wizened old hunter.

He stood there for a long time and watched us, looking out our caves and the cliff wall up and down. He descended one of the runways to a drinking place, returning a few minutes later by another runway. Again he stood and watched us carefully for a long time. Then he turned on his heel and limped into the forest, leaving us calling quer-

ulously and plaintively to one another from the cave mouths.

I found her down in the old neighborhood, near the blueberry swamp, where my mother lived and where Lop Ear and I had built our first tree shelter. It was unexpected. As I came under the tree I heard the familiar soft sound and looked up. There she was, the Swift One, sitting on a limb and swinging her legs back and forth as she looked at me.

I stood still for some time. The sight of her had made me very happy. And then an unrest and a pain began to creep in on this happiness. I started to climb the tree after her, and she retreated slowly out the limb. Just as I reached for her she sprang through the air and landed in the branches of the next tree. From amid the rustling leaves she peeped out at me and made soft sounds. I leaped straight for her, and after an exciting chase the situation was duplicated, for there she was, making soft sounds and peeping out from the leaves of a third tree.

It was borne in upon me that somehow it was different now from the old days before Lop Ear and I had gone on our adventure journey. I wanted to be near her, and I knew it. And she knew it too. That was why she would not let me come near her. I forgot that she was truly the Swift One and that in the art of climbing she had been my teacher. I pursued her from tree to tree, and ever she eluded me, peeping back at me with kindly eyes, making soft sounds and dancing and leaping and teetering before me just out of reach. The more she eluded me the more I wanted to catch her, and the lengthening shadows of the afternoon bore witness to the futility of my effort.

As I pursued her or sometimes rested in an adjoining tree and watched her I noticed the change in her. She was larger, heavier, more grown-up. Her lines were rounder, her muscles fuller. Three years she had been gone—three years at the very least—and the change in her was marked. I say three years. It is as near as I can measure the time. A fourth year may have elapsed which I have confused with the happenings of the other three years. The more I think of it the more confident I am that it must be four years that she was away.

Where she went, why she went and what happened to her during that time I do not know. There was no way for her to tell me, any more than there was a way for Lop Ear and me to tell the folk what we had seen when we were away. Like us, the chance is she had gone off on an adventure journey and by herself. On the other hand, it is possible that Red Eye may have been the cause of her going. It is quite certain that he must have come upon her from time to time wandering in the woods, and if he had pursued her there is no question but that it would have been sufficient to drive her away. From subsequent events I am led to believe that she must have traveled far to the south, across a range of mountains and down to the banks of a strange river, away from any of her kind. Many Tree People lived down there, and I think it must have been they who finally drove her back to the horde and to me. My reasons for this I shall explain later.

The shadows grew longer, and I pursued more ardently than ever, and still I could not catch her. She made me believe that she was trying desperately to escape me, and all the time she managed to keep just beyond reach. I forgot everything—time, the oncoming of night and my meat eating enemies. I was insane with love for her and with anger, too, because she would not let me come up with her. It was strange how this anger against her seemed to be part of my desire for her.

As I have said, I forgot everything. In racing across an open space I ran full tilt upon a colony of snakes. They did not deter me. I was mad. They struck at me, but I ducked and dodged and ran on. Then there was a python that ordinarily would have sent me screeching to a treetop. He did run me into a tree, but the Swift One was going out of sight, and I sprang back to the ground and went on. It was a close shave. Then there was my old enemy, the hyena. From my conduct he was sure something was going to happen, and he followed me for an hour. Once we exasperated a band of wild pigs, and they took after us. The Swift One dared a wide leap between trees that was too much for me. I had to take to the ground. There were the pigs. I didn't care. I struck the earth within a yard of the nearest one. They flanked me as I ran and chased me into two different trees out of the line of my pursuit of the Swift One. I ventured the ground again, doubled back and crossed a wide open space, with the whole band grunting, bristling and tusk gnashing at my heels.

If I had tripped or stumbled in that open space there would have been no chance for me, but I didn't. And I didn't care whether I did or not. I was in such mood that I would have faced old Saber Tooth himself or a score of arrow shooting Fire People. Such was the madness of love—with me. With the Swift One it was different. She was very wise. She did not take any real risks, and I remember on looking back across the years to that day when she did not run away very fast, but waited rather for me to take up the pursuit again. Also she directed

her retreat before me, going always in the direction she wanted to go.

At last came the dark. She led me around the mossy shoulder of a canyon wall that outflung among the trees. After that we penetrated a dense mass of underbrush that scraped and ripped me in passing. But she never ruffled a hair. She knew the way. In the midst of the thicket was a large oak. I was very close to her when she climbed it, and in the forks, in the nest shelter I had sought so long and vainly, I caught her.

The hyena had taken our trail again, and he now sat down on the ground and made hungry noises. But we did not mind, and we laughed at him when he snarled and went away through the thicket. It was the spring time and the night noises were many and varied. As was the custom at that time of the year there was much fighting among



I Pursued Her From Tree to Tree, and Ever She Eluded Me.

the animals. From the nest we could hear the squealing and neighing of wild horses, the trumpeting of elephants and the roaring of lions. But the moon came out and the air was warm and we laughed and were unafraid.

I remember next morning that we came upon two ruffled cock birds that fought so ardently that I went right up to them and caught them by their necks. Thus did the Swift One and I get our wedding breakfast. They were delicious. It was easy to catch birds in the spring of the year. There was one night that year when two elk fought in the moonlight, while the Swift One and I watched from the trees, and we saw a lion and lioness crawl up to them, unheeded and kill them as they fought.

There is no telling how long we might have lived in the Swift One's tree shelter. But one day while we were away the tree was struck by lightning. Great limbs were riven, and the nest was demolished. I started to rebuild, but the Swift One would have nothing to do with it. As I was to learn, she was greatly afraid of lightning, and I could not persuade her back into the tree. So it came about, our honeymoon over, that we went to the caves to live. As Lop Ear had evicted me from the cave when he got married, I now evicted him, and the Swift One and I settled down in it, while he slept at night in the connecting passage of the double cave.

And with our coming to live with the horde came trouble. Red Eye had had I don't know how many wives since the Singing One. She had gone the way of the rest. At present he had a little, soft, spiritless thing that whimpered and wept all the time, whether he beat or not, and her passing was a question of very little time. Before she passed, even, Red Eye set his eyes on the Swift One, and when she passed the persecution of the Swift One began.

Well for her that she was the Swift



I Struck the Earth Within a Yard of the Nearest One.

One, that she had that amazing aptitude for swift flight through the trees. She needed all her wisdom and daring in order to keep out of the clutches of Red Eye. I could not help her. He was so powerful a monster that he

could have born me limb from limb. As it was, to my death I carried an injured shoulder that ached and went lame in rainy weather and that was a mark of his handiwork.

The Swift One was sick at the time I received this injury. It must have been a touch of the malaria from which we sometimes suffered; but whatever it was, it made her dull and heavy. She did not have the accustomed spring to her muscles and was indeed in poor shape for flight when Red Eye cornered her near the hair of the wild dogs, several miles south from the caves. Usually she would have circled around him, beaten him in the straightaway and gained the protection of our small mounded cave, but she could not circle him. She was too dull and slow. Each time he headed her off, until she gave over the attempt and devoted her energies wholly to keeping out of his clutches.

Had she not been sick it would have been child's play for her to elude him, but as it was it required all her caution and cunning. It was to her advantage that she could travel on thinner branches than he and make wider leaps. Also she was an unerring judge of distance, and she had an instinct for knowing the strength of twigs, branches and rotten limbs.

It was an interminable chase. Round and round a back and forth for long stretches through the forest they dashed. There was great excitement among the other folk. They set up a wild chattering that was loudest when Red Eye was at a distance and that hushed when the chase led him near. They were impotent onlookers. The females screeched and gibbered, and the males beat their chests in helpless rage. Big Face was especially angry, and though he hushed his racket when Red Eye drew near, he did not hush it to the extent the others did.

As for me, I played no brave part. I know I was anything but a hero. Besides, of what use would it have been for me to encounter Red Eye? He was the mighty monster, the physical brute, and there was no hope for me in a conflict of strength. He would have killed me, and the situation would have remained unchanged. He would have caught the Swift One before she could have gained the cave. As it was, I could only look on in helpless fury and dodge out of the way and cease my raging when he came too near.

(Continued Next Wednesday.)

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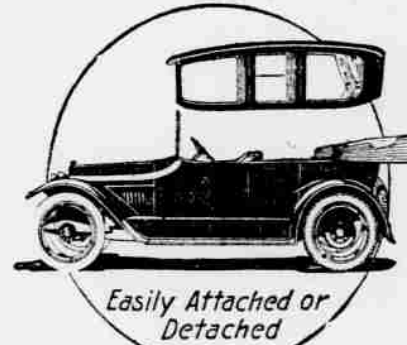
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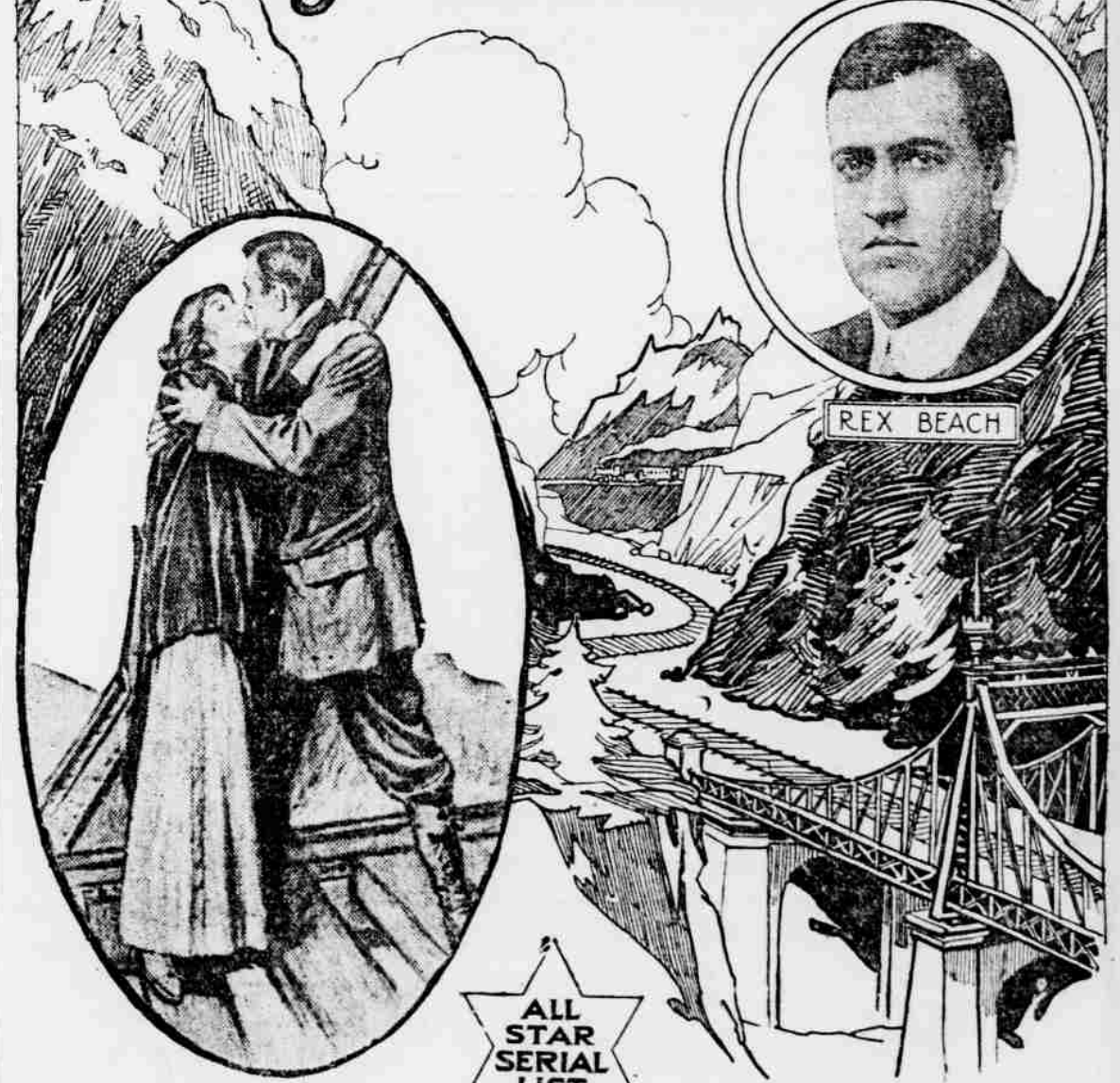
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